

HANS COHRSEN

Interviewed by: G. Lewis Schmidt

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Q: Mr. Cohrsen has a very interesting background, and I would like to ask him to begin this interview by giving a brief summary of that background, including his birth in Germany, what brought him to the United States in the first place, and from there on, what he did before he got into the Information Service. Then I'd like to have him give a brief sketch of his career there.

Biosketch: Early Years in Germany: Emigration to US 1926

COHRSEN: I was born in Germany in 1905. My training was as a businessman. I had an apprenticeship in the wholesale metals business, and I became active in the political situation about 1924 when there was a referendum on expropriating the former Kaiser and the King of Bavaria, of their property, because they had gotten the world into the first world war. It was a complete flop. I formed a sort of non-partisan committee in Mannheim, where I lived, and organized a mass meeting, but in the end I found myself alone with the communists as partners, with whom I had no truck whatever. All the other parties had checked out. The experience made me feel I couldn't live in that country.

So I emigrated. I had the good fortune of having second cousins of my mother in Philadelphia. I left January, 1926 on my 21st birthday for Philadelphia and there took the usual odd jobs you have to take to keep going. I worked in Lipp's Department Store framing mirrors and pictures. I packed china at Wanamakers during the Christmas season. Then I sold brushes from door to door in Philadelphia, particularly in the suburbs.

Survival in US: Onset of Depression

New York. After a week, he fired me. I think he had then some businessman who imported Czech jewelry hired me to work for him in gotten me to New York to get me away from his fiancée.

I went back to selling Fuller brushes in New York for a few years. There I met many ex-Germans, young people who, like myself, had become vegetarians. With two of them I bought the Vita Health Food Company in Washington in 1928, a health food store, one of the first in the country. But I checked out about a couple of years later because of personal differences, went back to New York, driving a taxi cab, running a health food store, and doing all sorts of things.

After a visit to Germany in 1930 to see my parents, I decided I was going to live more or less permanently in this country. I told my father so. He didn't see it at all. He wanted to set me up in business. I returned to New York in March 1931. It took some time before I got my footing again.

Cohrssen Decides to Become an Economist: Long Association with Yale University Professor Irving Fisher

In the meantime, the Depression had started and I decided I was going to be an economist, helping to fight the Depression. I got in touch with the Stable Money Association, which was close to the ideas which we promulgated. "We" meant a group of young Europeans, Germans and Swiss, who were proponents of the Silvio Gesell ideas of economic reform, meaning particularly monetary reform and monetary stability.

That's how in 1932 I met Irving Fisher, a Yale professor, who was very active at that time fighting the Depression. He was interested in our ideas of issuing stamp scrip, as a means of employing the unemployed, alleviating the need in the communities. At first he asked me to help him answer his correspondence with communities that wanted to issue stamp scrip. Then we wrote a little handbook on the issue of stamp scrip. But then Roosevelt, as he got into power, stopped this. He had closed the banks. He didn't allow the issuance of emergency money. Fisher kept me on to do the research on a book called Stable Money, and put my name on the title page with his. I worked with him for ten years in various capacities, visiting Europe twice to study monetary and economic conditions.

In 1942, I went to work at Business Week magazine as special assistant to the publisher. After a year of that, I became the economist of the Institute of Life Insurance.

In the meantime, the war had broken out and I became aware of the fact that maybe I should contribute to the Allied cause. My people in Europe were suffering and so many had died.

1931 Hitler's Accession to Power Persuaded Cohrssen to Obtain American Citizenship

Q: By this time, I gather you had become an American citizen. Would you briefly go back and cover that, then take it from there?

COHRSEN: The day after Hitler had gotten into power on January 30, 1933, I went down to the courthouse and applied for American citizenship. I wrote my parents, "Get out of Germany." They were Jewish, but they wouldn't listen. My father had become a very strong supporter of German democracy, and he still thought there was a chance of fighting dictatorship.

1942: Joins Wartime Information Services: Service in North Africa, Italy, and Finally (1945) Austria

Well, in 1943, I joined the US Information Services Psychological Warfare, was shipped overseas, first to West Africa and then to Italy, to Rome, where I worked as liaison between propaganda and economics, which meant visiting places of destruction and furnishing the basic information for the photographers and the press people who wrote it up, trying to promote economic recovery at the base.

The Building of Austrian Radio - Ultimately Known as the Red-White Network, in Salzburg

Toward the war's end, I was sent up north to Milan to control the German language program of control on Radio Milano. That didn't last long because the war was over. And chiefly because I knew German, and then they said, I had some radio experience now, I was made Chief of Programming of the non-existent Austrian Radio in the American sector of Austria. Well, on June 6, 1945 we started our program from Salzburg, with a speech by the general, news and music. In Rome, I had met Denise Abbey, an excellent secretary, who agreed to come along with me. She was of tremendous help to me. There was also one more American, a young man, who had worked with NBC in this country. Offices and studios were built for us by the Army in a Franciscan monastery. From my office I had views of St. Francis Church, the Salzburg Castle, and the Cathedral.

In a matter of three months, we had nine hours of programming. Our first studio was in a dressing room of the local theater. Our live music was the harmonica of one of our studio engineers. So we had news and harmonica music. Our other music came from the collection of records that had belonged to the Prince Eugene Propaganda Train of the Nazis.

Q: May I interrupt at this point to ask you a question? In the broadcast of news, were you trying to carry any political content, or were you just giving news as it developed, without any kind of interpretive comment whatsoever?

COHRSEN: We had practically no comment, our only commentary was practically the Voice of America, which was broadcast once a day. It was direct from the United States. We did develop a commentary program which consisted of the views of others. We monitored Radio Moscow, Radio France, and the BBC, so we knew what these people were saying. Our news department was actually very efficient. The BBC quoted us on one or two occasions, "as we learned through Radio Rot-Weiss-Rot in Salzburg."

Q: I was going to ask if your station became part of the Austrian Red-White-Red network.

COHRSEN: We were the network, with stations in Salzburg, Linz and Vienna. The name was invented by an American, and our broadcast signal was "Oh Du Mein Oesterreich" from a popular song. We gathered an unusual group of talent around us, Austrians who had fled Vienna from the Russians. There had been a group of Austrians who had set up radio in Bad Aussee, called it the Freedom station. It was underground at first, and became the collecting point of radio people from Vienna, most of whom then came to us. So we got people like Axel Steinbrecher, who was a splendid musician. He had written a lot of the popular songs. We had a man by the name of Schoenwiese, a leading literary man, who published a literary magazine. He just celebrated his 80th birthday.

We had two men whom I selected as my special assistants. I picked them up in Rome. One was Jerry Wilk, who became more or less my deputy for the cultural features, a lawyer from Berlin, the other one was Eric Mamerow, a journalist from Berlin. Eric put order into our news department. I had started by writing the news myself. It was fascinating to do something I'd never done in my life, and do it before the experts came. [Chuckles] Anyway, he set up a terrific news department, which measured up to that of any other European station. He had been a German newspaper correspondent who had fled Hitler to France, was caught by the Germans and put in their so-called punitive battalion into North Africa, which was then caught by the British, and they put these people to work. I met another man in Algiers, Jean-Louis Hily, who had been with the same battalion. He became a press officer for the French. He was instrumental in setting up German radio in the Sector occupied by the French.

So we had excellent news. We also had a German newspaperman, Paul Becker, interested in scientific and cultural affairs. He ran that department and he later became the director of the station after it had been turned over to the Austrians. Our music department obtained the records and sheet music of the Sankt Florian Library, where the composer Bruckner had worked. It was a wonderful collection to produce good music programs. The man who kept stock of our records was an Austrian expert who had done the same thing in Vienna for the Austrian Radio. We soon had an efficient and highly productive organization, and the crowd of people who sat together in the morning to discuss current affairs and twice or three times a week to discuss longer-term program plans came up with many brilliant and original ideas. It was a very creative bunch. The atmosphere in that newly liberated country was something you simply can't imagine. It's like being at a wedding all the time. It's like creating the world anew. These people worked hard and took all sorts of hardships upon themselves.

Q: I'd like to interpose a question at that point. As you well know, there was a very strong Nazi influence in Austria at the time of the Anschluss. And, I gather, through a good portion of the German occupation there were Austrian Nazis. These people whom you had access to presumably had not had any taint of Naziism, but did you find any indication of Nazi sympathies when you were in Austria in the early stages of the occupation?

COHRSEN: I had nothing to do with the clearing of these people. They all had to pass scrutiny by the CIC, Counterintelligence Corps, and if they came with a paper saying that they were cleared, there was supposedly no problem. I found in two cases I had been deceived. One case was a man interested in philosophy who had come from Innsbruck and ran this type of program. One day he was arrested and thrown into prison. By sheer stupidity, he had told someone that Vienna would be turned over to the Russians without a fight, and it caused bloodshed. He was found innocent and resumed his career.

The other person, wrote me after I had left Austria two or three years later, "I was a Nazi and they found out, but in the meantime, I've proven myself as a true democrat, and have done valuable work for Rot-Weiss-Rot. Wouldn't you give me a paper to help me clear my record?" I wrote him back. "I can't change your past and you lied to me. So you have to live with your conscience. I am not going to do anything for you." I found out he had been a member of a theater-ensemble and had denounced a colleague as being Jewish, who was thrown into a concentration camp where he died. What shocked me was that my Austrian friends on our staff knew about it, and never told me. That man later became very successful in the musical field in Salzburg, but I suppose there were many like that who got away with it.

But on the whole, the people I had to work with were too much involved in building a new Austria, and that was the general tendency, and that's what got me into trouble with my American colleagues, because they considered our station chiefly as a means of the American Government to impose its policies upon the Austrian people. Now, being on the ground, you have a different perspective. You see what sufferings and injustice they had gone through. Austria had a great cultural tradition and, before the Nazis took over, much artistic and intellectual freedom, and they felt they knew about as much or more than we Americans did when it came to Austrian affairs. After the war, with anti-Semitism eliminated, and the country free of the Nazi influence, you had about the same structure of society that you find in any free country. There was an active group of intellectuals, a self-respectful middle class, all of them full of good will and the desire to do the right thing. Of course, there will always be unreconstructed rebels in any society, of the Nazi type or some other type. We had to contend with that.

What we tried to do was to emulate an American type of radio program. I introduced a town hall meeting of the air. That was quite interesting, because when I first discussed this with the acting governor of Land Salzburg, he said, "Well, Mr. Cohrssen, you won't be able to do that for ten years. Our people aren't ripe for this sort of free discussion. They don't know how to do that."

We had the first such meeting a few months later in our big studio. There was room for an audience of 350, but only one person came, one local person. There were a dozen people, members of our staff and friends. Our moderator was Louis Bauer, who later became the boss of Austrian Petroleum, a very charming man. I think it was about education, how we should go about re-educating the Austrians. Louis would say, "Well, the lady over there in the corner." It was actually a woman who was sitting next to him. And there was this one man from the community, he spoke up and made very intelligent remarks. We concluded the program after a half an hour, and felt it was a success for the first time. But then that one man who constituted our audience came up to me and said, "Mr. Cohrssen, I'm afraid you can't use that."

I said, "Why not?"

"Because I was a prominent Nazi in this community and everybody knows my voice. You can't overlook that." So we had to throw our tape away.

The second time, there were about a couple of dozen people in the audience. The third time, the studio was packed, and we had a very heated discussion. I think we discussed the problem of housing, finding shelter for people in a community with thousands of refugees. So many people had come to Salzburg from other countries and didn't know where to live. The local population was very critical of the government in Vienna. Well, as a result the Austrian government in Vienna complained that we were undermining its authority.

We tried numerous ways to promote free expression. We invited people to round table discussions on different questions, including religious and scientific matters. It became a regular program.

The problem was that while I was trying to establish an Austrian radio operated on American principles, some of my colleagues, the American staff that ran the department from Vienna, felt I was not doing enough to promote America. I wasn't of that opinion. Among other texts I translated the Gettysburg Address. We introduced the American literature that had been banned. But I felt that the Voice of America was too propagandistic, and our audience, having been subjected to German propaganda for years, resented the American propaganda line even though they agreed with the ideals we were trying to sell them.

Q: What year was this?

COHRSEN: This was 1945-46, the year after the war. So I placed the American broadcast, the Voice of America, later in the evening though it was supposed to be used in prime time. Thus, I was considered an enemy of the Voice of America. I wrote several memoranda to induce its writers to be more informative and use less rhetoric. We had some discussions about it at our Vienna headquarters, and I believe my point of view prevailed. In any event, they let me run the program the way I wanted.

Controversy Over Program Written by Young US Citizens of Austrian Birth Assaulting the Catholic Church

I had one big controversy at headquarters, with this young American who was with me in the beginning. He participated in the production of a program called "We Learn How to Think." He and a few literary persons dug up old German revolutionary poetry from after the First World War. As that program was handled by an American, it was not censored. When I heard the second of these broadcasts I was shocked, because it was an attack on the church. This revolutionary German literature accused the priests for having supported our unjust war. I felt I had to stop this, because we had not come to undermine the authority of the church.

Q: Pardon me. This was the young American whom you had brought up with you that was doing this?

COHRSEN: He was assigned to me. During the war he was voicing propaganda by loud speaker across the lines. He was an American citizen of Austrian origin who had emigrated and had worked in broadcasting. I think he was with NBC. He was an expert. That's why he came to me.

Q: You have answered my question. I was going to say if he was an American, did he know enough German to do this, or how did he know?

COHRSEN: Oh, no, he was Austrian born, highly intelligent, but heavily influenced by the leftist ideology. So I said, "You're not going to do this. We don't want to alienate the local citizens. We can't affront the clergy. Most of these people have been victims of the Nazis. It's a political question. I don't want that in the program."

So he went to headquarters, and I was called down to Vienna. We had it out before the general. The young man said I had no experience, was unfit for the job, and should do something else; and the Austrians had to be re-educated. It was the line that actually came out of Washington: that every Austrian was a Nazi and you had to teach him how to think. I wasn't of that opinion. These were highly cultured people and all they needed was a voice to express their own cultured views.

Anyway, in the future, he had to submit his programs to my scrutiny before they went out. The next week he sure kept me waiting. The broadcast was scheduled at 7:00 P.M. At 6:00 o'clock, he threw his manuscript on my desk. I had to cut out certain lines, which caused a problem with the artists, who had already rehearsed the program. But that was the only time when I had a real problem, and that was very much in the beginning, as early as November/December 1945.

Some of my superiors in Vienna intended to give up Salzburg as an independent station, because I believe they had been influenced by the Russians. In fact, one of our leading men bet me a bottle of champagne that by the first of January 1946, there wouldn't be any Rot-Weiss-Rot anymore, that henceforth, it would all go back to the RAVAG, the central radio station in Vienna, the way it had been before.

But RAVAG was controlled by the Russians. I resisted this attempt of abandoning Rot-Weiss-Rot. I even threatened to write Congress to have this stopped. It never happened and I never got my champagne. On the other hand, I had very good relations with my Russian counterpart, a Major Goldenberg, who was the controller of their program in Vienna. I visited him and I found out that his mother and brothers were living in the States, and I became his means of corresponding with them. So naturally, he was very cooperative.

We created a common program, which was, I think, unique. It was called the "Voice of the Allies", one hour a week, where each of the Allies had 15 minutes: 15 minutes each of French, British, Russian, and American programs. The hour was broadcast in all four occupation sectors of Austria. The Russians talked only about the democracy and freedom enjoyed by their workers and how satisfied they all were to be able to live under communism. The British talked a lot about university life and sports and activities of that sort. The French talked about their culture. I wrote our program called "America As It Is Not Known,": It dealt with Sunday in America; how you buy in America; about American county fairs, that is, impressions of America that I had experienced myself. There were only six minutes of talk and nine minutes of music, and it went over big.

That was one example of how our radio contributed to a better understanding of America in all four sectors of occupied Austria.

Q: I wonder if your Russian colleague, or counterpart, had any difficulty with his own people?

COHRSEN: I don't think so. Once we invited him and his technical colleague for a party, to Salzburg. We took them to the local operetta, and then had some Russian emigres sing old folk songs. They were very sentimental, it was highly successful. After he had had quite a lot of whiskey, he put his arms around me, a huge man, and I'm rather small, and he said, "Look here, Hans. You're fine, but you ought to have more democracy."

I said, "You ought to have more freedom." We've always remained on good terms.

But I found out later the way the Russians operated. If you'll allow me, I'll tell you a personal experience on this. The Russians tried to create a revolution during that first year.

Q: You mean in Austria?

COHRSEN: Within their own sector, where they had appointed only communists as mayors of the communities. All officials were appointed by the Russians with the exception of the police, which was under the direction of the Austrian Ministry of the Interior. They were independent of the Russians. There were many cases where they arrested policemen for insubordination and sent them to Siberia. I've talked to many provincial people who told me of their struggles with their local communists who were supported by the Russian military. But the communists remained a small minority party.

So one day the Russians announced that the workers were taking over the factories, because there was danger that the country was becoming capitalistic again, and they were going to prevent that. While they made this announcement, they even attempted to take over the government of Austria. The Press Secretary of the Austrian Chancellor-he later became my brother-in-law-told me that a group of people stormed into their offices at the Bauhaus Plat. Fortunately, the Austrian guards could lock the doors behind them, and they were caught inside. There were not enough of them inside to cause any damage. It turned out that one of the men caught was a Russian colonel who had put on old civilian clothes. He and his men were going to arrest the Chancellor, and announce to the country that the government had been taken over by the working people. The radio stations controlled by the Russians announced that this was the day that everybody had been waiting for: such and such factory had been taken over by its workers, etc.

Q: Was this the Russian station in Vienna that was announcing this "news"?

COHRSEN: It was the Austrian RAVAG station under Russian control. I talked with the people who were running that station. They told me: "We listened to those announcements, and then we put our own man on the air to state that this had been the news as handed down by the Russian occupation forces. Then we broadcast the Austrian news as we do every day. Now the Russians broke into our office and said, "You're going to go to Siberia for that." We told them we'd been under this threat from the beginning, but nobody was going to change our attitude.

I believe that the Russians left Austria in part because of this general attitude on the part of the Austrians. The Russians had learned they could not subjugate these people.

Q: That's very interesting, because last week I was down in Florida and I interviewed a gentleman by the name of Al Puhon.

COHRSEN: I met him. Yes.

Q: Yes. He was at that time not a senior officer; he was a middle-grade officer. He was German-born, but he had become an American citizen, and although only a middle-grade political officer in the embassy, was very close to the ambassador at that time. We talked briefly about the Soviets leaving Austria. I said, "What do you think caused the Soviets to give up the idea of staying in Austria and deciding to leave and to execute a peace treaty with Austrian neutrality as long as Austrians would accept the neutrality?" And he said he really didn't know what the reasons were. I won't go into all of his explanations. He gave two or three possibilities, one of which was very close to what you've just said. I'm interested to have you corroborate that feeling.

COHRSEN: I've met Al Puhar. He may have been closer to the people in Germany than I was. I don't know. I found out about the Austrian attitudes not only at that time, but later on, because I married into an old Austrian family. My father-in-law, who was the highest civil servant of Lower Austria, went into hiding when the Nazis took over and saved his life. The family suffered a great deal. They were upstanding Austrians who had no truck with the Nazis. Austrian history has been misinterpreted in this country, particularly, by the American Jewish Congress. I can say that because I'm Jewish born myself. It's a ridiculous attitude. It's created a great deal of ill will on both sides, which is unnecessary. There were Nazis. Hitler was an Austrian. But Chancellor Dollfuss tried to stop Hitlerism. He said, "The only effective way to fight these Nazis is to use their methods. If we continue to let them terrorize us, they will force us into a new society." So he set up a fascist type of government, as the only way of controlling this brutal force. It's just like saying you have to be a good Democrat and find the drug trade taking over the country. You've got to stop it by force or you're not going to do it at all.

Q: You mentioned the chancellor. Was this Dollfuss?

COHRSEN: Yes. Dollfuss was murdered by the Hitlerites. Schuschnigg, his successor, was weaker, but he still tried to maintain law and order at the time. When a minority becomes rampant, what are you going to do? The reason Hitler marched into Austria in 1938 was because there was going to be a plebiscite on the question: Will the Austrian people join the German Reich? There was much Nazi propaganda for the so-called Anschluss. So the government was going to let the people decide. Hitler marched in before that could take place, because he knew two-thirds would vote against him. This is a fact that is generally ignored by the American press. Perhaps it has been mentioned. But the American attitude seems due to the fact that the president of Austria, [Kurt] Waldheim, is not particularly well-liked. If he hadn't been under such attacks from America, he would have had much less sympathy in Austria than he has now. He is not considered a Nazi; he's a politician with a weak personality. You have plenty of those in this country. You have them in every country. I mean, it's ridiculous.

To go back to my story. That attempt at revolution failed, and there were other attempts. Figl, who was at that time the Chancellor of Austria, was hosting the Russian general in charge. When he told the general that this wasn't the way to do things in Austria, that he would never be able to subjugate the people, the Russian said, "I'm going to have you sent to Siberia for that."

He replied, "You can't threaten me with this. I've been to Dachau the past three years. And every other member of my cabinet is prepared to go to Siberia."

I think it had a great deal to do with the decision of using Austria as a sort of buffer state between Russia and the West. I think it was that kind of spirit that we were confronted with also in trying to subject them to American propaganda. They wouldn't take it. They said, "We've had enough of that sort of thing."

And this was an attitude I fought against in memoranda to my superiors, and that was, I think, the cause, why I was thrown out rather ungraciously. After 30 months overseas, I decided I was going to go home to my family and have the usual vacation. We all had worked rather hard. So I was given time off and got very wonderful letters from my superiors in Vienna. The general wrote how much he appreciated what I had done, and would I come back safely. It was completely false, because I hadn't arrived at the Salzburg airport that morning, the first of April 1946, when they had my replacement there. I was told everybody knew that I wasn't coming back. Everybody but me.

When I went to Washington, after three months at home, to find out when I was going back, Hans Speier of the State Department who had visited Salzburg, told me, "You're not going back because look here." There was a cable from Vienna. "Ever since Cohrssen's left, there is such harmony in the place. We would be relieved not to have him come back. The program has improved."

Q: Did you say the cable was from Ted Kaghan?

COHRSEN: No, I think it was from Van Erden. But it was an official statement. Van Erden, I think, was the man in charge. Kaghan was the one responsible for radio. I have a personal letter from Kaghan about the work I'd done. "I wish I could go back to the States and say I've accomplished as much for my country as you did, dear Hans," and this kind of business. But it was completely false, so far as I was concerned. They kicked me out.

Q: Was that the time that they also dismissed Denise Abbey?

COHRSEN: No. Denise stayed on. I don't know how long, but she was later dismissed for "inefficiency". She was the most efficient person I've ever met, because she took personal responsibility for what she was doing. You just had to tell her, "Denise, you have to write this and this. We have to do such and such," and she said, "All right. I know." And off she went, and she did it. When I was away, she handled the office. She spoke German well enough to understand, and she was respected and loved by everybody. After they had dismissed her, she talked to some other official who knew how much work she had done, and she was assigned a much more important post. I think she took over the information bureau or the library or something, and she had continued in US government service (with USIA) until her retirement.

Q: But she never joined you again after that dismissal?

COHRSEN: No, no. I was then sent over to Germany as program control officer at Radio Frankfurt, where I had a little similar experience. Some of my American colleagues in the other German radio stations had been German refugees who had been in the US only relatively few years before they were drafted into the service. Now some of them spoke very poor English, but towards their German staff they insisted they couldn't speak German. It was sort of a punitive action towards their German colleagues. They felt superior. There was no social contact whatsoever, which accounted for a hostile atmosphere within the station. If you work together, you have to talk to each other. But if you pretend you don't know German, and actually you know it better than they do, they don't like it. I had some of them come up for meetings at Radio Frankfurt, and they said, "What's going on here?" Here I was, an American control officer, I sat down with them, and we had coffee. I asked them for dinner or lunch and saw to it that they were properly housed, because they came on my responsibility. They said, "It would never happen in our shop." And that, I think, was a wrong attitude.

Furthermore, the American complement in charge of German radio was headed by a man who was later under indictment for having been a communist sympathizer. Well, I think everybody has a right to his own opinion. He seemed to have a great antagonism against me. He must have felt that I didn't belong to the crowd, which didn't help me very much. [Laughter]

Q: This was in Frankfurt?

COHRSEN: That was in Frankfurt. I arrived there in December 1946.

Q: After you had gone to America and come back and been assigned to Frankfurt, Germany.

COHRSEN: Yes. But in Frankfurt, I had less responsibility. I was not the boss. So I made my suggestions and I produced my programs, and I didn't have too much contact with my American colleagues.

Cohrsen Again in Difficulty at Radio in Frankfurt for One of His Broadcast Commentaries

I had one program I called "From the Work of the Occupation Forces." I tried to tell the people what we, as Americans, were trying to do to put the economy back on its feet. It was five minutes or so, once a week or twice a week. I don't recall. Pretty soon I got into trouble again, because it was a question of, I think, 20,000 tons of wool that the Americans had turned over to the German economy in order to have blankets and clothing produced for the needy. That wool had disappeared. I was given this information by some Americans at headquarters, who told me, "Look here. We are desperate. We're trying to do something, but the Germans are not cooperating." There had been some smart businessman or a group of business people who had gotten hold of this wool and turned it into clothing, all right, but for their own benefit.

I made that the subject of my commentary. I asked, "Where's the wool?" Well, it raised a tremendous stink in the papers, and then there was a complaint by the German wool interests to headquarters. They were giving me that complaint, and I prepared an answer to it, in consultation with the people at the economic section that was trying to do something. I was not permitted to use it, because headquarters in Wiesbaden said "no". They explained it: "You're interfering with German-American relations. We have to do business with the people as they are, and we can't have this."

My evaluation card to the State Department Information Services evaluating my work was not so good. Why? Our program sessions with the Germans were run by the man we had appointed director of Radio Frankfurt. When during a program conference someone would make a suggestion, "Let's do such and such," he would say, "No." I objected: "Wait a minute. This man has an idea. Let's discuss it. If we are against it, we'll vote it down. But let's first find out why it should be no."

And so a few times I had to insist. The result was he complained to headquarters that I was undermining his authority, interrupting the good German-American relations. And I got that into my report card. Again, if you stand up for certain principles, it doesn't necessarily serve your own interests.

1949: US Returns Control of German Radio to Germans: Cohrssen Goes to Radio Free Europe but Soon is Released

Anyway, when in 1949-50 the time came to disband the control over German radio, I was offered the opportunity of going to Washington as a member of the State Department USIA, (State Department Information Service). But I also had an offer from Radio Free Europe, which was just setting up in Munich to broadcast across the Iron Curtain. I took that and I became its first program manager. I didn't last long, because again I had a different concept. My idea was to give the Europeans, the free Europeans in the West, and the people behind the Iron Curtain, the same program. I set about to exchange programs with BBC, French Radio, and Italian Radio, in such fields as women's programs, workers' programs, cultural programs; that is programs that would show how people lived in different European Countries, what their problems were, and how they solved them. We would receive the manuscripts, and translate them into different languages, and that way let Europeans east and west participate in our life.

This wasn't necessarily the concept that the CIA had when it set up Radio Free Europe, and after a year they said, "Cohrssen is still around. Why is he?" So I was released.

Cohrssen Returns to US to Found New Non-Government Organization and Inaugurates a Voice of Europe Operation

Coming back to America, I found friends who had similar ideas, and we decided to do something about it. We created a foundation with very good people. I raised some money and went back to Europe trying to establish a "Voice of Europe" program to the United States. I had working journalists in different European capitals, who were capable of formulating European as opposed to national opinions. A movement was under way for European unification, and it was also the policy of the American Government to promote European unification. So we felt we were doing the government's bidding.

- But Later Developments Prevent Realization

When we were ready to go, the Council of Europe was to be our partner. We were going to broadcast from Strasbourg announcing, "This is the Voice of Europe; we're broadcasting from the offices of the Council of Europe." That was all the propaganda they wanted. They had no intention of interfering with our ideas.

But at that time, [Joseph] McCarthy was against the importation of so-called "foreign ideas," and we couldn't get the money we had hoped to get from the Ford Foundation. I continued on my own in Europe and got the support of the Congress of European Organizations. That's the German-American clubs, Italo-Americano, France-Etats-Unis, English-speaking Union as the main stem of this. But I had to raise the necessary money. I needed \$100,000 and I had pledges for \$50,000.

The German weekly Der Spiegel, patterned after Time magazine, ruined it all by "exposing" me as an American who was having a good time at the expense of the German people. My foundation was granted 18,000 D marks from the German government Press Office to finance setting up this European network. I did not use this money for myself. I was supporting myself by selling Collier's Encyclopedia to the American forces, pushing door bells, going to Army and air bases, on ships coming in, to sell those encyclopedias, and I made a living doing that. [Tape recorder turned off]

Concluding Comments on Austrian Radio Period

Q: I guess we've covered generally most of what you did with the forerunners of the US Information Service. In our time off the record, you commented that you had a few things to say about what you were doing in Austria. So why don't you just take over from there and we'll conclude this interview with your comments in that regard.

COHRSEN: I have found, in the end, that the best thing I could do was to take care of the physical welfare of the people who worked for me, because they had the brains, they had the ideas, and they had the culture to make themselves understood, and introduce American type of democracy, in an Austrian fashion, much better than we could. So my main activity, essentially, was to look after their welfare. I went out to requisition homes. I set up a canteen downstairs. One of the employees was running it. His wife was a good cook, and our people could eat. I gave them transportation so they could go out to the country and get meat and milk and whatever you couldn't buy, to supplement their meager diet.

That bore good fruit in two ways. First of all, we had a good program. It was the only German language program, Swiss radio took over at that time. Secondly, and it's a funny thing: When Rot-Weiss-Rot celebrated its fortieth anniversary a few years ago, I was the only American whom they interviewed. They had me on TV and on radio, and claimed that I was the one who had built Austrian radio. My merit was that I let them do what they really wanted to, and what they could do, much better than we Americans. I think it bears a lesson to any occupation force. Pick the people who think the way you think, and let them do it their own way. Get out of their way. Give them support. I think that's the result of my experience during this after-war period.

Q: I think that's an excellent idea. What I hope is, of course, that we'll never have to have another war which will end up with an occupation force. But should it be that way, that's a good thought on which to conclude.

COHRSEN: Thank you.

End of interview